THE VULNERABILITY OF GOD
Isaiah 42:1-7
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Can you remember the first time you were vulnerable: the first time you gathered your courage and extended yourself out on some precarious limb? Can you recall, for instance, the pain of your first love, and all the awkward and embarassing rituals you engaged in before you expressed it so very tentatively in a scribbled note or modest gift? And do you recall the mortal fear that your love might be rejected as inadequate or ignored as insignificant or, worst of all, laughed at, and that at age nine, life and joy would be over?

Vulnerability can be distressing, threatening, frightening. It means to be open to attack, to be capable of being hurt. It means to place yourself at the disposal of someone else. It is always very risky and we will go to great lengths to avoid it.

The memory of vulnerability and rejection is embedded deeply in most of us. Unconsciously, it has a great deal to do with the way we handle vulnerability as adults. The Menninger Clinic holds seminars for successful business executives to help them relate more creatively with their colleagues and employees. On a feature on the Today Show last week, a Menninger psychiatrist was telling a group of business executives that their success, their drive and high motivation was almost, without exception, related to rejection, real or imagined, and consequent guilt as children. They were succeeding in life precisely because they had decided long ago never to be vulnerable to rejection or hurt again. Unfortunately, that success was accompanied by a very dismal record of human relationships.

James Wall, Editor of the Christian Century, wrote an essay recently in which he recalled his own first experience...As a first grader, in a burst of "organizational excitement", he proposed that his class take on the second grade in a game of football. His teacher agreed, and gave him responsibility for making all the plans and arrangements. Finally the day for the big game arrived. He was dispatched to inform the second grade teacher that all was ready. Unfortunately, he had neglected to invite her and the second grade to participate. He writes, "Miss Carson forever branded my psyche by telling me to go back to my part of the playground and leave her alone. To this day I can never plan a meeting without a fleeting memory of the pain of Miss Carson's rejection." (The Christian Century, 11/31/80, p.1286).

Strong feelings make us vulnerable - strong love, loyalty, commitment, compassion - inherently carry with them the risk of getting hurt. It is a powerful and significant literary theme which emerges with regularity in plays, novels and motion pictures.

In the play and movie, Same Time Next Year, George and Doris carry on a lifelong relationship on the basis of one annual meeting. The drama treats adultery a little too flippantly, but infidelity is not the subject of the work - human relationships, human growth is. In one superb sequence, at the beginning of middle age, George has become the very incarnation of the American Businessman stereotype: busy, pressed, impatient, drinking too much, a candidate for an ulcer, heart attack, or both. Doris, on the other hand, is currently in something of a second adolescence, finding her way through the peace movement and has effected the dress and speech of the counterculture. As soon as they meet there is trouble. The conversation turns immediately to Viet Nam; he takes the hard line, "bomb 'em back to the "Stone Age"position. She spouts the easy platitudes of the far left. There is no communication at all; George becomes hostile and then the awful truth emerges, almost by accident. His son has been killed in the war. He can't deal with that - particularly his parent-feeling about it. Businessmen don't cry; successful, strong men don't give themselves to grief. That's too vulnerable. Men get angry and shout and push

and fight. But George does break down and becomes utterly vulnerable in a very touching sequence and humanity and healing begin to emerge immediately.

In Judith Guest's novel and movie, Ordinary People, a very controlled, middle-aged woman cannot deal with the accidental death of her son, and instead worries about all sorts of peripheral, trivial, busy matters: the next vacation, appropriate cocktail party conversation, the kind of shoes her husband chose to wear to the funeral. And then a second son attempts suicide. Much of her pain, it turns out, is a result of her inability and unwillingness to be vulnerable; to give and receive the kind of love which makes people vulnerable to one another.

Perhaps the most startling assertion of the Christian Faith is that God is vulnerabl that God chooses the highly charged and powerful dynamic described by the word "vulnerabili as the mode of His relationships with His creation.

The idea first took shape in the sixth century B.C. The going theology was that a deity's strength, sovereignty, ultimate authenticity, was reflected in the fortunes of his people. If the tribe was victorious in battle, the deity's strength was thus confirmed. If the tribe's fortunes were dismal, one of two reasons was assumed: either the deity was unhappy with the people and punishing them, or the deity's power had been eclipsed by another, stronger god. When David, Solomon, and a few of their more successful heirs were on the throne in Jerusalem, it was not difficult to believe in God, and further, to believe that the one God had chosen the nation as a special people. But what to believe when the nation's fortunes begin to crumble? What are the theological implications in being the doormat for the whole Middle East? Their scholars and poets wrestled with the problem. One of them wrote a story about a man who was pushed around by fate for no reason whatever. Job was not being punished: his suffering was not a reflection of God's will. In the sixth century, the nation or what was left of it, was overrun entirely by the armies of Babylon. The Temple was leveled, Jerusalem sacked, and the leaders of the nation and culture - probably four or five thousand people - taken back to live in Babylonian exile. In their humiliating captivity, the Israelites began to ask the tough theological questions If God is active in history, where in the world was He in that chunk of history that got us into this mess? If God's hand is on the controls, why do we keep on suffering while other nations who never heard of Him, and wouldn't care if they did, prosper? What does it mean to be chosen by God when you end up without a temple, or country, or home?

An exceptionally brilliant prophet/poet living back in burnt-out Jerusalem anticipate their agony and wrote a letter to the exile community. That correspondence occupies the last section of the Book of Isaiah. In it the writer makes several assertions: one, God is about to act to straighten things out: "Prepare a way in the desert," the prophet advised. "Behold your God": something important is about to happen. Two, you are His chosen people but what you don't know yet is that to be chosen by God is not a bed of roses. Rather, at least part of what God has chosen you to do is to suffer. The prophet used the haunting image of God's "suffering servant" to suggest the meaning of what was happening to the nation. "Behold, my servant", he wrote, "He will not cry or lift up his voice." Three, the prophet suggested that the nation's self-emptying and suffering reflects the way God relates to His people. He is not a potentate deity ensconsed on a golden throne, high in the heavens. God empties Himself of all privilege and becomes vulnerable.

It was a stunning suggestion: so stunning, in fact, that most of the people didn't even hear it. Instead, what they heard was the old "God as strong warrior" idea, and what they did was sit back and wait for God to bloody a few Babylonian noses so they could rebuild their city and temple and start pushing people around like David and Solomon did, and like everybody knows God's people are supposed to do. Isaiah tried to tell them that

their God was different:that their God was vulnerable to human sin and historic evil and that He was so vulnerable that His projects just might fail.

Six centuries later one of them understood the idea of suffering servant so perfectly that we can't hear the words without thinking of Him. But 2,500 years ago, in captivity, they had trouble with the notion. So do we. Sometimes it evokes outright hostility, a concept captured by W.H.Auden in his Christmas Oratorio. Herod the Great, speaking about the recently reported birth in the province, laments, "O dear, why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else? Why can't people be sensible? Why can't they see that the nation of a finite God is absurd? Because it is. And suppose, for the sake of argument, that this story is true...Would it make life any better? For me personally, it would mean that God had given me the power to destroy Himself. I refuse to be taken in. He could not play such a horrible practical joke."

For Auden's Herod the Great, and a lot of people not so great, the vulnerability of God is a bad joke. That God, purposely, would be weak, that He would risk failure, is incredible, maddening and sometimes angering - particularly when His vulnerability gets Him involved with tragedy and suffering.

Worst of all, God's vulnerability puts us on the spot. God at the whim of humanity places His fate in our hands and that thought, frankly, is almost too radical, too intense, too demanding. It's more comforting to believe in a God whose power and sovereignty mean that He can get along very well without us. But what if He can't? What if God needs us?

Perhaps our fundamental problem with the whole business is that we aren't comfortable with our own vulnerability. Perhaps we are offended by the suggestion because we spend so much energy and effort avoiding vulnerability. Perhaps the starting point therefore is not theological distraction but the human experience.

Nothing much important happens without vulnerability, I have concluded. Biographies and autobiographies of the artistic, musical and literary giants who have shaped our civilization are, more often than not, accounts of the exquisite pain of vulnerability. Nobody is more vulnerable, more exposed than the artist who has invested everything in the creation of a picture, and then must reveal it to a public - unsophisticated, uninvolved, uncaring; or the playwright who has spent a year writing and finally has brought the show to production and then must read the coldly objective cynicism of the critic; or the author who must open the publisher's rejection slips.

People who run for office, even those who do it as a life's work, experience radical and intense vulnerability.

To apply for promotion or a new job is to expose oneself to rejection. To go out for a sport, a part in a play, is to risk being laughed at.

In an age that has specialized in celebrating, massaging and coddling the solitary self, many men and women deliberately choose to avoid the vulnerability of total commitment in favor of temporary living arrangements. Marriage exposes one: marriage creates vulnerability. Love - if it is love - always makes one vulnerable. People who are afriad of intense feeling are essentially afraid of being vulnerable. People who don't say "I love you" even when they feel it, to their spouses, children, parents or friends, may hide behind a facade of superficial gruffness, but they are, in truth, afraid of the vulnerability which always accompanies the words, "I love you".

God invites us to be fully human by willingly becoming vulnerable. To live behind a protective wall: to walk through life with defenses in place and guard up: to cling to one's love and give it selfishly and tentatively is, frankly, to live just half a life. We believe God has created us for more than that: we believe He wants us to be fully human by becoming vulnerable.

We believe that, for this very purpose, He became vulnerable. We believe that God, in Jesus Christ, placed Himself at the disposal of humankind. Jesus, after all, was born into a very modest and very human situation, under the sovereignty of a puppet monarch who set out to murder Him as soon as he heard about the birth. That's how serious God is about the matter. With any number of alternatives at hand, Jesus chose to place the success of His venture in very human hands. At the very beginning, He did something which demonstrated eloquently His identification with humanity - His willing acceptance of human vulnerability by walking into the waters of the Jordan River and submitting to baptism by John. Jesus chose that, we believe. Throughout His life and ministry, He chose to be what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the man for others". He chose to be exposed, vulnerable. And when, in time, the opposition to Him solidified, His vulnerability became terribly clear, as He, God incarnate, was tried, convicted, humiliated, crucified.

God's vulnerability is not an exercise in masochism. It is, rather, for us. It is to show us His love. It is to invite us to live and love in the same way. The purpose of God's vulnerability is to make us vulnerable: to give us, thereby, our humanity, our salvation.

Amen.

God of love, we confess that we still stumble over the thought of Your weakness and suffering on our behalf. Help us to understand. More important, give us grace to love, as we have been loved, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.